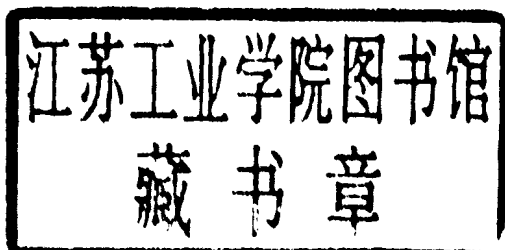# Language
# and Gender

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*Inter* te**x**t

# Language and Gender

- Angela Goddard and Lindsey Meân Patterson

ROUTLEDGE

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# acknowledgements

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# introduction

This is a small book about a big area. The aim of this Introduction is to explain the rationale for the selection of material, and to clarify the meaning of certain important terms.

## Sex and gender

First, the title. *Language and Gender* refers to the relationship between language and our ideas about men and women. 'Gender' as a term differs from 'sex' in being about socially expected characteristics rather than biology. So, for instance, while possessing different genitalia is about biological factors, seeing this as leading to certain forms of behaviour is about gender.

One example of this process is the traditional idea in medicine and early psychology that people with wombs were more likely to be emotionally unstable. We can see this connection in the origin of the terms 'hysteria' and 'hysterical', which come from the Greek *husterikos*, meaning 'of the womb'. Hysterical behaviour has traditionally been associated with women, and their biology has been given as the 'cause'. In this case as in many others, biology has been used to justify our social judgements, but this version of biology is itself socially constructed.

You may tell yourself that this is all distant history, and that because there is no obvious biological reference in the term 'hysterical', there is no issue to discuss here. But would you even now describe a man as being 'hysterical'? If not, is that because men don't behave in that way, or is it because this same behaviour in men would be called something else, perhaps something more positive?

## Man, male, masculine

While the terms 'man' and 'woman' can refer to definitions based on biological differences, the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' are always about expected gender characteristics – what men and women are supposed to be like. The 'ine' ending itself means 'like', as in 'bovine' (like a cow), 'vulpine' (like a wolf), 'Geraldine' (like a Gerald). (No, that last example wasn't a mistake.)

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While 'man' and 'woman' are nouns and therefore suggest 'people', 'masculine' and 'feminine' are adjectives and suggest qualities or attributes. So we could talk about 'masculine women' and 'feminine men' and be thinking about people who depart from the norm of what we consider appropriate for each sex. There is a third pair of terms – 'male' and 'female' – that can and often do shift between positions, according to the writer's intentions. If people talk about 'males' and 'females', they could be using the terms as nouns, as alternatives to 'men' and 'women'; but these terms can also function as adjectives, like 'masculine' and 'feminine'. So a writer might be talking of 'male behaviour' and really mean 'masculine behaviour'.

If you are going to get to grips with the ideas above, you need to do some practical investigating. As is true of all the satellite texts in the *Intertext* series, this book aims to give you some starting points for research of your own. But the topic of language and gender is a bit different from others in this series, in that there is already much published material on it, aimed at different age groups and operating at different levels. In particular, many textbooks aimed at secondary age students cover the idea of sexism in language and images, especially in the mass media. It is therefore likely that you will have 'done' this topic, perhaps several times, over the course of your school/college career. So why do it all over again in this book?

It isn't the case that just because you've 'done' gender as a topic, that there's nothing else to say. For a start, you need to ask *how* you studied this topic: what were the assumptions behind the thinking you were given, and that you yourself did? Also, research in this area has changed considerably over the years: how do you know that you're not stuck in the 1970s?

The comments below will outline the particular focus we have taken in helping you to get a perspective on what you might already have studied.

'The English language is sexist.'
'Sex stereotyping is all the fault of the media and of society.'
'Women use powerless language and that makes them inferior.'

These extracts from student essays show some commonly expressed ideas, and ideas that we want to challenge in this book in the following ways:

◉ people often put the blame for stereotyping elsewhere – for example, it's in the language itself, it's the fault of the media, it's to do with 'society'. They tend not to include themselves in their account. Our aim is to show how we all 'do' gender in our everyday thinking;

◉ looking at everyday thinking means looking at psychological processes and at social organisation. It's not enough just to look at language without considering how it relates to wider issues about how we think and understand, and how we view our own and others' social groups. So, for example, saying that a particular term is 'stereotyped' doesn't get us very far without some exploration of what the process of stereotyping might be about;

◉ there are many books on the subject of the linguistic usages of men and women, particularly on the differences between them. But the very fact that there is a lot of research causes a problem: how can you assess where any one article or textbook stands in the history of research in this area? For example, current ideas about 'powerless language' are certainly not those described above. So, rather than offering a catalogue of 'differences' – which you can easily get from elsewhere if you want them – we are offering ways for you to think about any account of 'difference' that you may read.

Because of the nature of what we are trying to do, you may well find that this book varies in how interactively it works: there are many activities, but there are also some sections that ask you to read blocks of text and think. So be prepared for some variation.

# Projections

The aim of this unit is to get you thinking about the relationship between the language we use and the world around us. Consideration of this is important when looking at language and gender, because we need to establish how far our ideas about the sexes are the result of seeing what we want to see – or, rather, seeing what we *have* to see because of the language that is available to us.

## The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis

The issue of whether language is simply a direct reflection of the world around us has been debated for many centuries. For example, the Ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates, asked questions about whether there was any intrinsic connection between an object and its name. In more recent times, the linguist, Edward Sapir, and the psychologist, Benjamin Lee Whorf, found themselves asking questions in the same broad area of language and thought as a result of their anthropological work with speakers of different languages, particularly North American Indian languages. They concluded that we are not simply passive recorders of what we find around us in language; rather, we impose our ideas on our environment as a result of the language we have.

This is how they put this concept, which has come to be termed 'The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis':

> We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds - and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds
>
> (Whorf, 1956: 213)

In other words, when we acquire language, we acquire ways of thinking - conceptual systems or grids - which we don't notice consciously because they just feel natural to us. It's a bit like viewing the world through a particular pair of spectacles that we've got used to wearing. And these spectacles are our culture. Some speakers - bilingual language users, for example - have more than one pair of spectacles. And here, speakers readily attest to the fact that they think differently when they use their different languages. Professional interpreters spend their working lives trying to match a set of concepts from one language with the words of another. And sometimes, there are gaps where an idea in one language is simply not encoded in another. For example, in Russian, there are no words to label 'hand' or 'foot' as separate from the arm or leg. Examples such as these give us evidence of the existence of the Sapir-Whorf 'linguistic systems' mentioned above.

Further practical examples of different languages encoding 'reality' differently are not hard to find. One of the most commonly quoted areas is colour terms. English, for example, has 11 basic words for colours - white, black, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange and grey. (This list does not include terms for colours that are incorporated in other colours - for example, beige is a form of brown, sage is a form of green, and so on.) In contrast, speakers of some New Guinea Highland languages have only two terms: 'dark' and 'light'. It's clear that in labelling colours, speakers of different languages chop up the spectrum in different ways - as below, where some English and Welsh terms are mapped against each other. What's harder to determine is whether this means the speakers of different languages actually see differently when they look at the same colour.

Another aspect of describing colour which appears to vary on a language basis is **metaphorical** reference. For example, where English speakers talk of 'blue jokes', in Spanish these are 'green' (but in Mexican Spanish, 'red' (Jones, 1999)); while 'green' for English speakers has at least two sets of **connotations**: ecologically-minded, and unpractised (with the suggestion of naïvety). English has many negative

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## Text: Colour terms map

```
        green            gwyrdd


        blue              glas


        grey
                         llwyd
        brown
```

connotations for the term 'black', which many people have seen as the cultural legacy of a white-dominated society. Black is used for bereavement, in contrast to the white clothes people wear to funerals in India. In English, white often stands for purity, while red connotes danger (or anger, as in 'seeing red') and yellow connotes cowardice. The list is long but that doesn't mean there's any logic in any of the relationships between the colour terms and the ideas that they call up for any group of speakers. These meanings are **arbitrary**: if we have associations for a particular colour term, it's more likely to be because we put them there than because they occurred somehow 'naturally'. If they occurred naturally, then everyone would have the same system.

The way speakers establish categories in language can be shown to relate to what they need language for – in other words, what the pre-occupations are in their particular community. Frequently discussed examples of this are that Inuit people have different words for snow, nomadic Arabic groups many words for different types of camel, and Australian aboriginal languages many words for different types of hole in the sand. Different lifestyles mean that some groups need to pay more attention than others to particular aspects of the environment, leading to more or less fine **discriminations** within language categories. These discriminations are important for the members of the commun-ity in question: a mistake about the weight that a patch of snow can carry, about the value of a camel, or about the type of creature that may inhabit a hole in the sand, all have real-life consequences. Snow, camels and sand-holes all have 'reality', but the fine distinctions between the

various different types are unlikely to be noticed by outsiders, for whom variations are not significant, or **salient**. If variations are noticed, they will be seen as minor variations that can easily be accommodated by the single terms they already have: to people from a temperate climate, snow is just snow, whatever its condition.

But languages don't only differ in the names they have for objects. They also differ in how they organise abstract ideas, such as ways of talking about relationships, or the qualities that people have. And here the possible effects of language upon thought seem more significant. For we are talking about our social values, how we treat each other and organise ourselves within society. However, abstract ideas are more elusive to grasp than the names of objects, and their effects are more difficult to plot.

## *Activity*

As a brief initial exploration of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, consider the following:

Swedish speakers have a term – *sambo* (*bo* = 'live', pronounced 'boo') – for a person they are living with but not married to. They also have the further terms below for people they are involved with:

> *sarbo* to refer to a partner who does not live with the speaker;
> *narbo* to refer to a partner who lives close to the speaker – e.g. a few streets away;
> *delsbo* (*dels* = 'partly') to refer to a partner who has a house of their own, but with whom the speaker lives for part of the time.

None of these terms are marked for the sex of the person who is being referred to (Hudson, 1999).

In English, we can refer to a person we are having a love relationship with in at least the following ways:

> my lover;
> my partner;
> my girlfriend/my boyfriend;
> my friend.

1    Can you add any further terms you use to the English list?
2    If you speak another language, what are the choices in that language?
3    Are you happy with the terms you can choose from, or do you think there are gaps? If there are gaps, what is it that you cannot express satisfactorily?
4    To what extent do the English terms force you to specify the sex of the person you are involved with?
5    Do you think that different groups in society might use the terms on the list in different ways? For example, how might a speaker's age or sexual orientation affect their choices and intended meanings?
6    What ideas are encoded by the Swedish terms? Would you find the Swedish categories useful? What might their existence within the Swedish system suggest about Swedish culture?

The responses you gathered to the questions above are likely to have varied according to a number of factors. The notes here are just an indication of some of the possible variables. One piece of recent research (Harvey, 1997) which surveyed usage among straight and gay male users of English found that age was significant for straight men in that the term 'girlfriend' suggested youth. Beyond that, the term 'partner' was seen by straight men as suggesting permanence and seriousness of relationship, while 'lover' suggested something less serious. However, gay men had different readings for some of the terms. For example, gay men saw the term 'boyfriend' as giving a more long-term, serious message about the relationship (regardless of the age factor) than 'lover'. Many of the gay interviewees commented that the term they chose would very much depend on who they were talking to and what environment they were in.

This activity was designed to get you thinking about the available options in any one language system. Aside from the way in which different languages present different options, however, it is important to realise that there are different groups within the same language system who might be served more or less well by the options available.

A broad point to make about the language choices presented here is that choices are clearly subject to change. For example, the term 'partner' is a relatively new phenomenon. This means that the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis cannot be true in any extreme way, otherwise language

change of this kind would never be possible. New social practices and configurations − in this case, people deciding to live together rather than get married − cause new language to emerge. But the fact that people want their experiences to be named at all should tell us something about the role of language, which is clearly to validate and legitimise a person's behaviour. The feeling that a word lends a sense of reality to an idea proves how powerful language is in our reading of the world.

# Anthropomorphism

**Anthropomorphism** means 'giving something a human shape', and describes another kind of projection that we often see in language. Exploration of this area will provide some more exemplification of the relationship between language and thought.

Perhaps human beings are essentially very lonely and insecure creatures. For it seems that we need to constantly project the idea of humanness onto the inanimate world. We make cartoons for children where objects like brooms and spoons talk and sing; one of our most successful credit card adverts in the 1980s featured a nervous Cockney-speaking pound sign called Money and his confident flexible friend, Access; we give our cars affectionate names and even call death-making bombs and hurricanes after human beings. Perhaps we hope that if we can humanise the inanimate world, it will seem friendlier and therefore less terrifying. The persuasive potential of this anthropomorphism is not lost on advertisers: see the advert on the next page.

As well as giving animacy to inanimate objects, we also 'humanise' the animal kingdom, often giving characteristics to animals that are completely unrelated to their behaviour in their natural habitat. For example, no one who has ever observed wild bears would think of them as the cuddly, soft items that populate the current 'Teddy Bear' shops.

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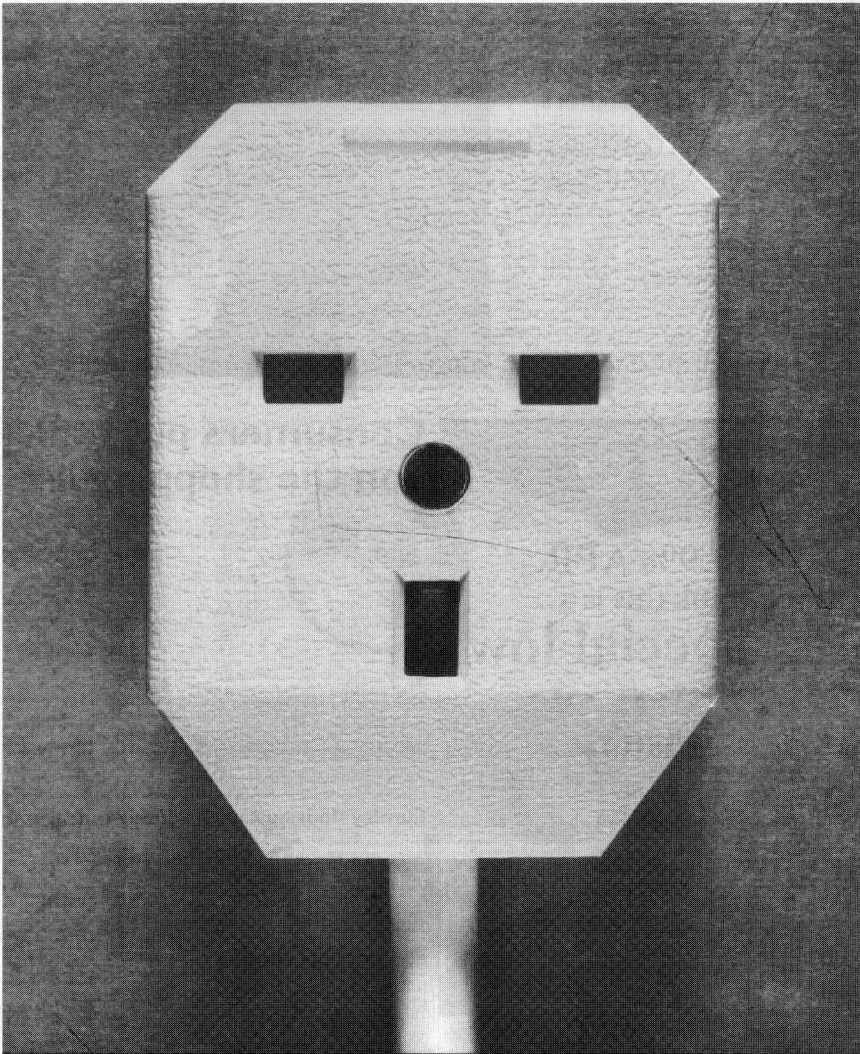
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## *Activities*

Below are some advertising logos featuring animals. The company using each logo is listed below. Why do you think the companies chose each of these symbols? What connotations are they hoping to suggest?

a)   Swan (kitchen appliances)
b)   Lloyds TSB Bank
c)   Lynx (parcel delivery service)

## Text: Animal icons



a)

b) Lloyds TSB

c) **LYNX**

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